



YOUR GRIEF:
YOU'RE NOT GOING CRAZY



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It is difficult to imagine the magnitude of pain associated with the traumatic death of a loved one. When someone is killed suddenly and violently, grief reactions of family and friends can be intense, complicated, and long lasting. If your loved one was killed in a drunk driving crash, you may feel angrier than you have ever felt and sadder than you thought possible. You may have scary thoughts and you may do strange things. You may be afraid you are “going crazy.” Grieving the death of your loved one can feel so overwhelming that you may question your own sanity.

For many people grief is uncharted territory and can be very unsettling. Understanding more about your grief will not change how you feel about the death of your loved one, but it may help you to feel more comfortable with the process.

ANTICIPATED DEATH VERSUS TRAUMATIC DEATH

Anticipated Death

Grieving the sudden death of a loved one is typically different than the experience of grieving an anticipated death. When the death of a loved one is expected, people often begin to feel the effects of the loss before the death actually occurs. Collectively, these reactions are referred to as anticipatory grief.

When a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness, family and friends may react with disbelief. They may seek several medical opinions to substantiate the prognosis. As death approaches, they may become angry; angry that modern science can develop machines as miraculous as computers but cannot find a cure for a particular disease. They may be sad and depressed as they face the fact that their loved one will die, yet long for relief as they watch their loved one suffer.

The acknowledgement that death is imminent either brings people closer together or it causes them to distance themselves emotionally. Either way, anticipatory grief is believed to cushion the impact. Together the person who is dying and the people they love have an opportunity to resolve feelings and relate lovingly before death occurs.

Family and friends are often surprised to learn that they go through many of the same feelings of disbelief, anger, and sadness after their loved one dies. Grieving an anticipated death can take several months or several years. Most people find that if they allow their emotions to flow and they talk openly about their loss, the pain will decrease, little by little. Those who attempt to deny their grief and pretend that nothing has happened may have more difficulty.

It is tempting to label anticipatory grief as “normal grief,” but few people, even in the best of circumstances, feel “normal” as they grieve.

However, the person who can anticipate a death may react differently than the person who has no time to prepare.

Traumatic Death

A sudden death is usually more difficult to cope with than an expected death. When a person is violently killed, the death is even more traumatic. Surviving family members and friends are emotionally assaulted with no time to gradually prepare for the loss. You could have never prepared for the incapacitating blow caused by your loved one's traumatic death.

Violence of the Death. Your loved one's death was violent. His or her body may have been mutilated. Knowing this may be more painful for you than the experience was for the one who was killed. When people are seriously injured they usually go into shock and do not experience pain. Many people who have recovered from trauma do not remember the point of impact, whether it was from an automobile crash, a gunshot wound, or other form of trauma. In fact, most say that it was some time before they felt pain, even if they drifted in and out of consciousness.

Even so, you probably would have done anything to prevent the violation of your loved one's body. You grieve the loss of your loved one's body and may deeply resent the fact that it was not respected by the killer.

Because of the condition of your loved one's body, you may not have been able to view it at the

hospital or funeral home. As a result, you may be relying on fantasies to form a picture of how he or she looked. You may even have doubts that your loved one died and may find yourself expecting him or her to walk through the door or call on the telephone.

Many people who were able to view the body of their loved one are glad they did. However, there are other ways to be assured of the reality of their death. The law enforcement agency that investigated the crash probably took photos of the crash. These photos may be at the prosecutor's office. The medical examiner or the funeral home may also have photos if you wish to view them.

Senselessness of the Death. Another difficult component of traumatic death is the senselessness of your loved one's death. People generally understand that death occurs when bodies grow old or are no longer able to fight disease. Your loved one's death, however, was clearly someone's fault. The fact that someone chose to be so negligent and reckless makes no sense at all. Knowing that your loved one's death could have been prevented may be one of the most painful aspects of your grieving.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

The Importance of Relationships

Death is accepted as an inevitability of life. Most of us understand that with the death of a loved one comes pain and suffering. However, in order to fully appreciate the impact of death, we must consider the significance of human relationships.

The degree of pain and suffering that follows a death is directly related to the nature of the relationship between the survivor and the person who died. Without the relationship, the death would carry no meaning and cause no suffering.

When a partner dies, the victim/survivor has lost a best friend, lover, primary confidant, and perhaps, co-parent. If your partner was killed, you lost such an essential part of yourself that you may feel incomplete and abandoned. Making major decisions alone while maintaining a family can be extremely difficult. Facing financial responsibilities without your partner's input may add to your burden.

We tend to view our parents as immortal. We anticipate that if and when our parents die, their deaths will be peaceful and pleasant. If a parent was killed, no matter how old he or she was, you may deeply regret that their death was an undignified one. Although some may say "He lived a good life," it may feel wrong that you could not say "Thank you for all you have done for me" or "Goodbye."

Sibling relationships are distinctive in that they often last a lifetime. Brothers and sisters share similar experiences and consequently share a common history. Even when a sibling dies during childhood, the surviving sibling tends to refer to that person as brother or sister. If your sibling was killed, their death brings an end to a significant relationship. Your brother or sister was your playmate, your protector, your friend.

The unique connection between parent and child leaves a parent especially vulnerable. However unnatural, unjust, or illogical it may seem, a child may die before a parent does. When the very essence of parenting is protecting and assuring life, the sudden and violent death of a child in a drunk driving crash is nothing less than devastating. This is true whether or not the child was young or an adult.

Regardless of your relationship with the one who was killed, the shock can be overwhelming. As human beings, we form strong physical and emotional bonds to others. When these physical and emotional attachments are severed, we react in ways to cope with the loss by grieving. You miss your

Many people struggle for months and years before they feel resolution to their grief.

loved one's physical presence as well as their personality and spirit.

Grief is not an event but a process of experiencing the physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual effects of a death or

other loss. Grief reactions are common to most people although each person grieves in their own way and in their own time. How you grieve depends on a number of things, including: prior coping skills, quality of the relationship with the person who was killed, circumstances surrounding the death, emotional support from family and friends, and cultural background.

Friends and even some family members may be ill prepared to support you while you grieve. Many people who attempt to comfort victims/survivors, including some professionals, do not understand that intense and long lasting grief are appropriate for victims of drunk driving crashes. Secondary victimizations can add to the trauma when survivors experience rejection from society or callousness from services and programs that are supposed to help them.

GRIEF RESPONSES

Physical Symptoms

During the first six months to a year after a fatal crash, people are vulnerable to physical illness. Medical experts have found evidence that intense grief weakens the immune system. There is also evidence that people beset by grief become vulnerable to other sorts of accidents, because they are preoccupied with their loss. Physical complaints, aches and illness are all common in people who are grieving. Your body's immune system is working

overtime, and you may feel worn out. This is your body's reaction to the trauma you have experienced.

You may have difficulty sleeping, or you may want to sleep all the time. You may feel nauseous and

Maintain regular contact with your physician for a year or two to be sure that you do not acquire a stress-related physical condition.

quit eating, or feel ravenous and eat everything in sight.

Whatever you are feeling, you are not imagining things.

During this early period of grief, eat well, get plenty of rest, and see your doctor if the problems persist.

Some people find the pain too difficult and turn to alcohol or drugs to ease the pain. Unfortunately, there is no easy fix to make the loss easier to bear. Alcohol and drugs both are likely to make the situation more difficult to cope with, because both will contribute to irrational thoughts and depressed moods.

You may need short-term medication prescribed by your doctor to help you eat or sleep while grieving. If so, do not consider it a weakness. You have suffered severe trauma and deserve professional help to begin feeling better. You will probably need the help of prescribed medication only for a short time. Even if you don't want to feel better yet, you owe it to yourself and your family to stay in good health.

Denial

Denial is a wonderful thing. It is the mind's way of buffering the full impact of a trauma until it can be absorbed. Upon learning that a loved one has been killed, most people are rendered too weak to undertake the overwhelming task of grieving.

When you heard of your loved one's death, you may have gone into shock. Going into shock is something like feeling the effects of a general anesthetic. With the help of a quick spurt of adrenaline and other chemicals in your brain, your initial response may have been "fight" or "flight." Fighters sometimes scream so they won't hear the message or physically attack the person who has delivered the bad news. Those whose reaction is "flight" may faint or run to try to escape the pain.

Regardless of the initial impact, if you are like most people, you soon found yourself in a state of numbness. Looking back now you may wonder how you remained calm. You may have completed some tasks that now seem impossible. You probably have a hard time remembering exactly what you did during those first few days.

During this time, people may have assumed that you were strong when you were actually in shock. You may have appeared strong but felt more like a robot, going through the motions.

Denial following a violent and unanticipated death is considered normal and functional. It allows

a person to travel through grief at their own pace and serves them well until they are stronger and better able to cope. It is impossible to push through any part of grieving in order to get over it. If you cannot think clearly, if you seem forgetful and detached, be patient with yourself. If you need help, ask for it.

Fear/Vulnerability

Many victims/survivors are surprised to find that they feel anxious, fearful, and powerless after the violent death of a loved one. Before the crash, you may have assumed you were immune to crime. Now you may feel that life is out of balance and that the world no longer makes sense. The part of you that was previously confident and carefree has been damaged.

We tend to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. For you, this belief no longer makes sense. Instead you may feel that you and your remaining loved ones are more vulnerable than other people. It is important to think rationally and work hard to risk going out, even when it frightens you. Little by little you can overcome your fears.

Anger

Anger is a common grief reaction. You may be surprised by the intensity of anger you feel for the person who killed your loved one. You may find that your anger is directed toward members of the legal system or hospital staff. However illogical it may seem, many people direct feelings of anger at a family

member or friend, or even at themselves for not having prevented the unpreventable. You may even be angry at everything and everyone.

You may wish desperately that the person who killed your loved one would show some remorse and say “I’m sorry.” That probably won’t happen. Many offenders do not feel remorse although some are indeed sorry. However, their attorneys warn them to make no contact with the victim’s family because such contact can be considered an admission of guilt.

The injustice of your loved one’s death, the deep hurt you feel, and the loss of future dreams may all add up to rage. Most of the things you think about doing must remain undone, like harming the offender. It is important not to act destructively in response to your anger.

Many people find it beneficial to talk with someone about feelings of anger or rage. Expressing these feelings can free the mind, enabling you to be more open and realistic in your thinking and planning for the future. Physical activity often helps. Some people run, exercise vigorously, or clean house. Others write in journals or write letters to the offender, which are better left unsent. Some cry and yell and scream. What you do with your anger really does not matter as long as you acknowledge it and you do not hurt yourself or anyone else in expressing it.

Your anger may be serving a deeper purpose, a profound sadness. Even though anger does not feel good, it can seem less painful than sadness. Anger can either be focused on someone else or it can be directed in a wide spectrum, not seeming to attach to anyone or anything. Sadness is yours. It is focused within. You will eventually need to give up some of the anger, rage, and vengeance to experience the sadness underneath it.

You may think that you owe it to your loved one to remain angry. What you do with your anger and when you decide to look beneath it are up to you. When you decide to look beneath the anger you may find intense agony. By being willing to face it you may find some relief.

Guilt

Anger frequently becomes guilt over time. Guilt is feeling somehow responsible for what happened, or thinking that you didn't do enough in the relationship while your loved one was alive. You may say to yourself, "If only I had known," or "If only I told him I loved him." Guilt involves a lot of "should haves" or "should not haves." Regrets are normal, but you cannot change the past.

Possibly the toughest job you will have in grieving is to look rationally at how your beliefs make you feel guilty. You may, indeed, be responsible for some component of your loved one's death. If so, acknowledge it and see if you can find

a way to forgive yourself. If you made a bad judgment, you probably made the best one you knew how to make at the time. Try not to exaggerate your role in your loved one's death.

In most cases, other factors were largely responsible for your loved one's death. The person who killed your loved one was negligent. Forces of nature also play a role. One law of nature is that when two powerful opposing forces collide one or both are destroyed.

Talking with others who have some understanding of your experience can help you look at your guilt realistically. It will be hard work for them and for you. Feeling less guilty will not take away your sadness or your anger, but it can be a big load off your shoulders. It will be worth the effort to rid yourself of it.

Faith/Philosophy of Life

People who have never thought about God before may do so in the wake of trauma. Likewise, people whose faith plays a significant part of their lives often find that they have to reconstruct their theology to accommodate what has happened. You may have been told that your loved one's death was God's will: you may have been told you should forgive. Working through issues of faith may take time and is yet another component of grieving.

COMPLICATED GRIEF

Depression and Anxiety

A drunk driving crash causes multiple physical, psychological, and social losses. A victim/survivor also suffers secondary losses that stem from those initial losses. While grief reactions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and fear are normal, a more serious psychological complication can develop over time.

You may find that feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, confusion, helplessness, and hopelessness are long lasting and that they are interfering with your abilities to function both physically and emotionally. Relationships with family and friends may be in jeopardy. These feelings may lead to thoughts of suicide or death and if they do, it is time to ask for help immediately. Clinical depression and anxiety can be debilitating but are very treatable.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

When people are exposed to a traumatic event they frequently suffer psychological consequences, such as depression or anxiety. Additionally, some people experience recurrent and ongoing recollections of the trauma, which can obviously lead to distress.

You may be driving in your car and suddenly have thoughts of the crash or perceive sensations (images, smells) that “bring you back” to the crash. You may wake-up in the middle of the night in a panic due to a nightmare.

Moments like these typically come about without warning and over time can cause you to avoid situations that you connect with the crash or these recurrences. You may feel on edge, anxious, always ready to react. Recollections can feel so painful and scary that they disrupt your normal activities and relationships.

Vehicular crashes are sometimes witnessed by family or friends. Shock, numbness, and rage are normal reactions to witnessing such a violent event. The mind's visual imprint of the scene can be overwhelming and long lasting.

Trauma victims/survivors who consistently experience all of these symptoms for at least one month or longer may be suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an anxiety disorder that is diagnosed by mental health professionals. If you believe you may be suffering from PTSD it is important to seek professional help as PTSD is treatable with a combination of therapies.

Professional counselors can help diffuse the impact of these memories by providing emotional support as the experience is relived, using techniques to help recall the memory with less horror. With help, positive memories of the loved one will replace the distressing memories.

COPING

When a loved one is killed, some people feel that they will never be happy again. Some victims/survivors go through a period of time when they are not ready to feel better. Others are eager to feel better and work to find ways to do it. Whether you are ready to feel better or not, you might want to look to others who have survived the ordeal and have managed to regain strength and find happiness again. They can be encouraging models.

The world is forever changed when someone experiences a trauma. Safety, security, predictability, and sense of control are all distorted. In order to regain a more accurate perspective of the world around you, you can work toward an understanding of the crash.

This search for meaning involves acknowledging your trauma and asking questions. At times there are no answers but it is nonetheless important to get answers to those you can. Asking specific questions about the crash and obtaining a copy of the crash report are ways to begin.

Investigating potential financial resources can help alleviate some of the financial stressors you are experiencing. Likewise, researching the criminal and civil justice systems can also empower you. There are agencies and written materials that can aid you in understanding your options.

As with the many challenges we face in life the methods of coping you choose can either be

Coping Tips:

- *Tell your story, over and over again.*
- *Get support from a professional counselor or support group in your area, if you feel you are ready.*
- *Write about your experience in a journal.*
- *Seek information about your loved one's crash, to answer those unanswered questions.*
- *Understand that everyone grieves differently, and be especially sensitive to family members who may be grieving differently than you.*
- *Reinvest in life by reaching out to others.*

productive or damaging. They can be either healthy or self-defeating. Coping is an attempt to adapt your new circumstances into your existing life and you may try a variety of means to achieve this; some that work and others that do not.

Your life will not be the same as it was before your loved one was killed. Learning to manage grief requires that you recognize, acknowledge, and accept all that is involved in the journey. Many people describe the grief process as a roller coaster ride with ups and downs along the way. However painful and difficult, grieving is necessary to heal and to find new meaning in life.

MOURNING AND TRIGGERING EVENTS

You will always feel sorrowful knowing that your loved one died tragically and that the long relationship you might have enjoyed was cut short. However, this sorrow is not the emotional equivalent to the intense grief that most victims/survivors experience for the first months or years. A sense of sorrow is not the same as being overwhelmed by grief.

While the initial responses to the death are defined by the term grief, mourning refers to the internal processes associated with adapting to life without your loved one. Some have described mourning as a “misty fog on life.” You are not always aware, yet you realize that life is not quite as bright, not quite as light as it was before. Your values may have changed and you may be impatient with things you deem unimportant or trivial.

It is likely that you will experience twinges of grief from time to time for many years. Victims/survivors are often surprised to find that in the midst of a series of good days, something brings on an episode of grief. Strange as it may seem, these episodes of grief can be understood as celebrations, celebrations of a relationship that meant so much to you that episodes of grief can still overcome you from time to time.

Anniversaries, holidays, and birthdays often trigger reminders of the death or absence of your loved one. Perhaps the most significant and most difficult anniversary is that of the crash. The annual date of the crash may cause anticipatory anxiety and can contribute to renewed grief for victims/survivors.

The first anniversary will most likely be the most painful; however, it may also be an opportunity to respond to the death in a manner that was denied at the time of the crash. Commemorating your loved one's death on this day helps everyone to celebrate the life that was lost.

Other annual celebrations, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Mother's Day will continue to take place year after year. In the past these times of joy brought your family together. Now and forever they will trigger memories of your loved one.

Today these holidays will be difficult, but later will provide you with reasons to reminisce and begin new rituals. Planning ahead for holidays and birthdays not only allows you to prepare for those events, but also provides ongoing and open communication between family members.

As time passes, the memories associated with your loved one will no longer evoke the same intensely painful thoughts and feelings. The loss will take on new meaning and the context of your relationship will change. Eventually you will develop a renewed perspective of the world around you.

HEALING

Getting Better

You will never forget what happened. If you are afraid to get better because you think you might forget your loved one, know that you will never forget. You will always cherish the memory of your loved one. You will always regret that you were unable to share life with him or her for many more years. In time you will remember the happy memories more often than the painful ones that fill your mind now.

Nearly all victims/survivors are able to say that they are grateful they shared life with their loved one as long as they did, rather than wishing he or she had never been born. To experience depths of sadness and heights of joy is to be fully alive, fully human. Most people are glad they are capable of having strong feelings. Having feelings means that denial and numbness are no longer necessary and the fullness of the experience of the trauma can be absorbed.

Getting better means:

- Solving problems and completing tasks in your daily work routine again;
- Sleeping well and having energy again;
- Feeling good enough about yourself to be hopeful about the rest of your life;
- Being able to enjoy the pleasurable and beautiful things in life again.

You probably will be able to achieve these in time. For most people it takes years and hard work.

Focus on Life

Other components of healing are an increased focus on life and a decreased focus on death. Early in your grief you may have felt that you barely existed. When others told you to cheer up and get on with your life there seemed to be an unwillingness to share in your grief journey. You may feel disappointed, frustrated, and angry at their lack of sensitivity and understanding.

Ultimately, you will have to decide when it is right to give more of your attention to living. You can use your grief to continue to drag you down, or you can use it to rebuild your life, probably with more compassion and understanding than you had before.

You may understand, in a way most people do not, how vulnerable we all are and how important it is to make each day count. You may never feel quite as safe as you once did, nor quite as trusting. These are changes that often occur after enormous loss. They are all compatible with healing.

For some, enduring trauma ignites a spark of activity to right some of the wrongs involved in a sudden violent death. Most victims/survivors want to prevent it for others. Thousands of men, women and teenagers have joined Mothers Against Drunk Driving after their loved ones were killed. MADD helps injured victims and families of those killed to cope emotionally, helps them through the criminal justice system, and works to prevent drunk driving crashes.

MADD and other organizations similar to MADD can provide you with the opportunity to do what you can so others don't experience the tragedy you have. Some people find it helps them enormously to work to end drunk driving and victimization. It can feel as though it is the one activity that might bring something constructive out of their loss.

Going on can be a way of showing that life, as it was represented in your loved one, matters to you. It can be important too for others who love you and depend on you. For your own sake and for the sake of those who need you and love you, you have a responsibility to try to heal. You could not prevent the outcome of the drunk driving crash that killed your loved one. You can, however, control how you choose to cope with their death, and how you choose to live the rest of your life.

Literature Available from MADD

All titles available online at www.madd.org.

Most titles available in Spanish

BROCHURES

- Closed Head Injury**
A common complication of vehicular crashes
- Don't Call Me Lucky**
For those injured by drunk drivers
- Every Child Deserves a Designated Driver**
- Financial Recovery After a Drunk Driving Crash**
- Helping Children Cope with Death**
- How Are You Feeling?**
A teen's guide to loss, grief, and healing
- Living with Burn Trauma**
- Living with Spinal Cord Injury**
- Loss, Pain, and Healing**
A parent's guide to grief
- Men and Mourning**
A man's journey through grief
- Monday Mourning**
A guide for the workplace when an employee becomes a crash victim
- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 1**
Managing financial issues at home
- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 2**
Managing work issues after a drunk driving crash

- Picking Up the Financial Pieces, Part 3**
Financial recovery issues in court
- Selecting a Civil Attorney**
- Someone You Know Drinks and Drives**
- Unique Grief**
For the non-family bereaved
- Victim Information Pamphlet**
A guide through the criminal justice system
- We Hurt Too**
For adult siblings
- Your Grief: You're Not Going Crazy**

BOOKLETS

- Death at School**
- Your Victim Impact Statement**
A workbook
- Hangin' in there with Nigel (for children)**
Your grief workbook
- Hangin' in there with Nigel (for children)**
For coping with the injury of a loved one

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